

# “Joy”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – December 12, 2021

*Philippians 4:4-7*

This is the season of Joy. It is a time where it is said... joy has come. It is a time when we sing joy to the world. And today . . . we light the candle of joy. The candle is the odd-man-out glowing, the only pink candle between three purple. If you know nothing of church tradition . . . it doesn't take too much to know that today is special.

Today is special because of joy. The candle is pink . . . because of joy. And to give you the briefest of history lessons . . . the color goes back to a single pink rose during the season of lent. During the Lenten season that was traditionally marked with fasting, the early church singled out a Sunday to feast and celebrate the coming joy.

On this day, the pope would give out a single pink rose to honor an outstanding citizen. Clergy even began to wear pink vestments and decorate the church in pink to mark the day. Well . . . we have lost the seven candles of Lent . . . but gained the four candles of Advent. And among the four candles, you still see a single pink candle . . . the candle of joy.

But now, I ask you . . . what is joy? This could really be a hard question to answer. I mean, there can be so many different things that bring us joy. Joy for me is probably not the same thing as joy for you. The TV has recently been offering hundreds of different shopping ideas, each one guaranteed to bring joy. Get a new car wrapped in a big red bow, get that diamond necklace and earring set, or get that shiny new gaming system! But then there is the joy of family . . . the joy of a job well done. And I could go on and on. I guess if we are going to get anywhere, I must ask . . . why on earth is that candle pink? Now we know the historical reason . . . but what is the theological reason behind the pink color. It is not pink for the sake of cars, or jewelry, or electronics, nor is it pink for family or job satisfaction. So, why is it pink? Is there such a thing as “church joy?”

Looking through some of my story collections I was able to find only one illustration that dealt with “church joy.”

A small boy in the pew in front of you suddenly turns around and smiles a huge grin. He looks from person to person, smile stretching all the way back to those

in the back pew. He isn't gurgling, spitting, humming, tearing apart the hymnbooks, or rummaging through his mother's purse. He is just smiling. Suddenly, his mother jerks him around, and with a stage whisper that everyone can hear, she says, "Stop grinning. You're in church." With that she gives him a slap on his backside, and as the tears roll down his cheeks she adds, "That's better."

While humorous, I fear the honesty behind this story. Church is not always thought of as a place where we can smile. This is often where people come when the going gets the toughest. This is where you will find doors open and candles being lit in the wake of national crisis. This is where people often bring their biggest and heaviest burdens to lay down at the foot of the cross. And you can practically see the weight on their shoulders. How could we even possibly think of grinning when the person next to us is on the verge of tears.

A preaching professor at Harvard University tells the story of the year his 5-year-old son was working on an art project in his kindergarten class. It was made of plaster, resembled nothing in particular, but with some paint, sparkle and time in a kiln, it was ready to be wrapped as a gift. He wrapped it himself and was beside himself with excitement. It would be a gift for his father, one three months in the making.

Early in December, when the child could hardly contain the secret, the last day of school finally came. All the parents arrived for the big Christmas play, and when the students left for home, they were finally allowed to take their ceramic presents home. The professor's son grabbed his gift, ran toward his parents, tripped, and fell to the floor. The gift went airborne, and when it landed on the cafeteria floor, the shattering sound stopped all conversations. It was perfectly quiet for a moment, as all involved considered the magnitude of the loss. For a 5-year-old, there had never been a more expensive gift. He crumpled down on the floor next to his broken gift and just started crying.

Both parents rushed to their son, but the father was uncomfortable with the moment. People were watching. His son was crying. He patted the boy on the head and said, "Son, it's OK – it doesn't matter." His wife glared at the great professor. "Oh yes, it matters," she said, "Oh yes, it does matter." She cradled her son in her arms, rocked him back and forth, and cried with him.

In a few minutes, the crying ceased. "Now," said the mother, "let's go home and see what can be made with what's left." And so, with mother's magic and

a glue gun, they put together from the broken pieces a multi-colored butterfly. Amazingly, the artwork after the tragedy was actually more beautiful than what it had been in a pre-broken state.

At Christmas, the gift was finally given, and as long as he taught at Harvard, the professor kept the butterfly on his desk. It was a constant reminder that grief is real, and that loss hurts. It was also a reminder that from great loss, great beauty can eventually emerge. (*A Christmas Gift* by Andy Cook.)

And this is where several people are. They are lost, troubled, sad, fearful, devastated . . . anything but joyful. And they come here seeking answers. It is time we seek those answers too.

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS; AGAIN, I WILL SAY IT, REJOICE. LET ALL PEOPLE KNOW YOUR FORBEARANCE. THE LORD IS AT HAND. HAVE NO ANXIETY ABOUT ANYTHING, BUT IN EVERYTHING BY PRAYER AND SUPPLICATION WITH THANKSGIVING LET YOUR REQUESTS BE MADE KNOWN TO GOD. AND THE PEACE OF GOD, WHICH PASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING, WILL KEEP YOUR HEARTS AND YOUR MINDS IN CHRIST JESUS. (*Philippians 4:4-7*)

When Paul wrote these words, he had been stripped of everything, locked in a cold, dark, and wet prison cell, and had even been sentenced to die. And he sits down to write his friends in Philippi . . . “Yep. I’m in prison . . . again . . . and this time sentenced to die. And oh, by the way . . . rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice!” I don’t get it. I just don’t get it. Paul is definitely having a joyful moment. And he responds by writing this letter. A letter that, while it is only four chapters long, manages to mention joy ten times!

How can he say that? Has Paul lost it a bit here? I mean . . . wouldn’t it be just plain dumb to go up to somebody who is having a bad day and say, “Rejoice in the Lord always.”

How on earth can he write about joy? He doesn’t have anything to be joyful about. His life is on the line, he is cold, wet, and tired, he has no freedom, has no shiny car with a bright red ribbon waiting for him in the driveway . . . no limited-time diamond earring and necklace sale to take advantage of . . . no Playstation to occupy his time. He is parted from family and friends and cannot take a single bit of joy from a job well done because . . . well . . . being in prison had put a small damper on his traveling ministry.

Yet, over and over again in his letter to the Philippians, Paul brings up joy. Somehow, he got it into his head, that you don't need all that stuff to have joy. Even his earthly life being in jeopardy could not part him from joy. You see... looking deeper into the book of Philippians . . . we begin to see a pattern. For Paul, joy does not come from the world. It comes from God. Our God is the giver of true joy. Our God is the great comforter. Our God is the giver of a peace that transcends all understanding. And it doesn't come from something you can buy . . . it comes from something freely given.

You see, Paul's greatest joy was his assurance from God. He knew that nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is through Christ Jesus our Lord. We too have this great joy.

The candle there is not pink for any earthly reason. It is pink for a dear and heavenly reason. It is the great joy of the coming of Christ the Lord. As we journey closer and closer to Bethlehem, we are reminded of what awaits us when we get there. A savior, who brings us something that no one else can give . . . true joy. That is why Paul can write "REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS" because of what he writes in Verse 5: "THE LORD IS AT HAND." That is why Paul can write "AGAIN I WILL SAY IT, REJOICE" because of what he writes in Verse 7, "AND THE PEACE OF GOD, WHICH PASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING, WILL KEEP YOUR HEARTS AND YOUR MINDS IN CHRIST JESUS."

Yes, friends, the church can be a place of smiling . . . because of what the Christmas season is REALLY about. True joy cannot be packaged and wrapped and put under a tree. It can only be found in a manger. And it awaits there for you.

If you find yourself on December 25th with wrapping paper all around and start thinking to yourself, is this it? Is this what Christmas is all about? Then you really did miss the meaning of Christmas. Go back and look in the manger. See the baby and know the love He brings. Know the joy that is available to you as your ultimate Christmas gift. This is the true meaning of Christmas. Amen.